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ABSTRACT

Activities related to women's issues are many and varied at Slippery Rock University in Pennsylvania, but it is doubtful how much of this sensitivity trickles down into actual literature courses. Efforts at moving students away from passive reading and into a more critical stance that would promote active engagement with texts must be encouraged by English teachers. One method of fostering such a critical stance involves asking students to read "as women," whatever their gender. But underlying this approach should be a concern with the kinds of ideas about gender that readers bring with them to the classroom. An informal study was developed that investigated what uninstructed students know about feminism. First, the dominant trends in recent feminist criticism were identified. Next, the journal entries of students not instructed in feminist theory were studied to see if their responses to texts corresponded in any way with feminist criticism. Results indicated that what students comprehend most about the feminine perspective falls roughly into three categories: "biological"; "experience"; and "socio-political." Least understood are issues of "discourse" and "the unconscious." Students tended to choose active verbs when referring to men and passive for women. In short, while students may have rudimentary awareness of feminist issues, they are not conscious of how controlled they are by their own attitudes. Teachers need to clarify gender issues in literature instruction and encourage students to analyze their own language in terms of gender. (An appendix includes samples of student responses, arranged in tables describing the major viewpoints of current feminist criticism.) (HB)

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How Conscious Are Our Literature Students of Gender Issues?

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I. Introduction

Activities related to women's issues are many and varied at Slippery Rock University's campus. A sampling of activity just from this spring semester alone is indicative of the current campus wide eminence of this topic. The History Department is sponsoring a nine part weekly lecture series entitled, "Write Women Back into History"; the University has just hosted a three day symposium on "Women and Sport," subsidized through a five figure State System of Higher Education grant; and our university Women's Studies Committee, which recently strengthened the curriculum of SRU's Women's Studies program, has successfully sponsored its second statewide conference and is preparing to participate in its third being held at Clarion University concurrently with this conference.

But as my attention turns from campus wide activities to those in individual classrooms, specifically literature classrooms, I wonder if this radical (feminist) chic, if this new sensitivity and awareness of gender issues will trickle down into the consciousness (and critical responsiveness) of my students who are taking the two literature classes I am teaching this semester, Contemporary British and American Literature, and British Literature II. As these titles suggest, both courses were developed when New Criticism was king and when the male

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hegemony serenely assumed its power and authority in dividing and pinpointing its topic with neat labels and categories. My SRU students passively sitting in these courses are likewise expecting to receive the wisdom of that earlier age, as they turn to me, the classroom priestly authority who will give them the right and final interpretation of what the texts mean. Seductively, they seek to empower me with the outward forms of power and authority formerly reserved for the male authority figure. And a further irony is that most of my students are females: there are four males and sixteen females in the Contemporary Lit. class and four males and thrity four females in the Brit. Lit. II class. Most of the females in this class, by the way, plan to become English teachers. Margaret Homans' observation that "what's different today is not so much the ideological nature of the canon as its presumed audience: no longer just elite white men, but men and women [italics mine] of all classes and races" (156) holds true with a vengence in the SRU literature classroom.

In seeking to move my student readers away from their passivity, I began to speculate about what critical stance they could readily adapt that would promote their active engagement with the text, their active search for their own meaning[s]. I began with the assumption [logic-male domain] that since each student has a gender, he or she must feel [emotion-female domain] equipped to apply his or her collection of received conventional wisdom to his or her reading and understanding in finding out or

discovering what a text means. Steven Lynn's essay "A Passage with Critical Theory" in College English affirmed my assumption as I launched into this semester's project of empowering my students. He writes:

> I have only recently stopped being amazed at how easily and enthusiastically my students take to feminist criticism. Part of its appeal I suppose, is its simplicity, at least on the surface: to practice feminist criticism, one need only read as a woman. (268)

But with this supposed natural internal receptivity as well as the external campus wide gender based activity alluded to already, the questions for my classroom remain: How aware of feminist issues are my students? Is it possible that they (the majority females) can indeed read "as a woman" naturally with no formal instruction in feminist criticism? In fact, what ideas about gender issues do my students bring with them to the classroom, and how do their ideas shape their responses to the texts they read and write?

Obviously, my answering these questions can lead me to a future improved classroom pedagogy provided these students are representative of future students attracted to these two classes. So, I developed the following informal investigation that provides the bulk of the rest of this paper, and I share with you my method, the results, and my conclusion and recommendations.

II. Method

In setting up this study to answer what uninstructed students know about feminism, I saw my first task to be, Part A, identifying, pinpointing, and labeling (male domain - sound familiar?) the dominant trends in recent Feminist Criticism, a term defined effectively as "a group of diverse critical practices . . . [that] share, implicitly or explicitly, the aim to recover something that . . . has been lost or hidden from view, whether through suppression or repression: women in literary history" (Homans 160).

The next job, Part B, was to read the journal entries or students not instructed in feminist theory to see if their responses to the texts they were reading corresponded in any way to Feminist Critical Theory. The results, conclusions and recommendations follow.

Feminist criticism has not developed in a tidy linear manner. In fact, we might think of the area as "sprawling," even "chaotic" as is any area of inquiry at the center of change and revolution. The excitement and challenge of feminist criticism is that it is diverse and cannot be easily charted. Therefore, the following overview has been developed for the sole purpose of this study to identify only the major areas of feminist criticism's inquiry. To make this task more manageable, I have divided the chart into what has been called the "five main foci involved in most discussions of sexual difference" (Selden 136).

III. Results

The results of the graph shows that what uninstructed students comprehend most about using feminine perspective in their response to assigned texts fall primarily in three categories: "Biology"; "Experience"; and "Socio-politico-economic." But even though students wrote the most in these three categories, their comments indicate that their thinking corresponds only very loosely to what the feminist critics themselves have written.

Another way of looking at the students' response is to identify what students seem to understand least about feminist criticism. Those two categories are "Discourse" and the "Unconscious." These columns share only one student response. But, interestingly enough, the entire set of student responses indicates that what they know least are the gender attitudes that they have internalized, attitudes that show most in the language they themselves unconsciously bring to the task of describing feminine issues. These attitudes are not graphed, but they need to be briefly addressed. While they seem overtly to be saying very positive things about women, covertly, their language choice indicates negativity and even resistance to the image of an active, assertive woman, or as one female student so cogently states, "I think fe[man]ists take the fun out of being a lady."

Invariably, students chose passive verbs when referring to women and active verbs when referring to men. A couple examples

from female students might illustrate a variety of discourse strategies used by students when addressing gender issues:

A Females, in my opinion, were looked down on throughout the entire book [LeGuin, The Dispossessed]. As society progresses, it seems that people would become a little more openminded. Instead, these men looked down on everyone that was a woman.

and

A female British Literature II student studying Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats writes:

B The females, on the other hand, were considered weak and unintelligent as a gender. They were degraded in most aspects of life. They were thought of as meek people with no common sense at all. If a woman was strong, physically or mentally, she was not given the respect that she deserved. The men at this time wanted there [sic] women meek and un-dominating because I think that was romantic to them.

In passage A, the language unconsciously perhaps depicts the women as passive and the men as active agents who act upon the women. Also, the phrase, "these men" has no direct referent

other than "society" or "people." In either case, women are left out with the implication that "society," its power structure and its people are legitimately male. (Other students use the euphemismtic term "society" for the more direct term "men" when describing an active agent in promoting gender inequalities as in "society [italics mine; read men] did not welcome women in writing -- that was the men's areas."

In passage B, instead of using language that shows men via a patriachial power structure acting upon women, students avoid the issue in the passive construction that allows them to depict females as acted upon by some vague, unidentifiable outside force. According to students, women simply "were not permitted," "weren't considered" or "are just used for sex and that's all." If any active agent is identified, it is usually "society" as in the examples above.

The reason for students' covert acceptance of active male agents, and passive female receivers might be attributable to two different sources. One could be good old fashioned fear revealed in this male student's entry:

> Speaking directly of women's rights in general, I feel that women are trying to take it too far. They keep wanting more and more. For example, they now are trying to be able to join fraternities.

Another reason might simply be historical ignorance such as when a student skipping over the 1950s refers to the Middle Ages as a "time when women did no more than serve men" or another

student to "the era in which Pinter wrote" as a time when "women were just beginning to campaign for equal rights." Maybe the social conditions have improved enough in middle class homes that a middle-class female can right(eously) declare, "Just for the record -- I don't believe in ERA of feminism or any of that, and I think women (as a whole) [pun not intended] make it a big deal, for no reason. I don't really separate the sexes in my own mind, so it's hard for me to pick out 'women's issues,' unless they're <u>really</u> obvious, like in LeGuin."

IV Conclusion

What conclusions from all of this can we reach regarding the use of Feminist Criticism in the classroom? While students do have a rudimentary awareness of feminist issues, they are not conscious of how controlled they are by their own attitude. Many of the younger students (18-20), having grown up with the benefits established by the ERA movement and other feminist movements seem to have little, if any, comprehension of conditions precipitating the unrest calling for greater gender equality. In face, most of my students in Contemporary Literature find Marilyn French's <u>The Women's Room</u> to be repulsive, full of whining, complaining (for no reason) women.

To make texts (and issues) by and about women more accessible to the average student, I think we need to do two

things in the classroom:

1. We need to clarify the gender issues and their context.

2. We need to encourage students to analyze their own language, to comment on their own comments.

Since students "know" so much about the socio-politico-economic conditions relating to women, this is the area where it would be the best to begin, but without just formal instruction in Feminist Theory; instead, build from with the students' personal experience; begin with what they already know.

Jane Tompkins recently confessed that learning to write a formal critique:

> insulates academic discourse further from the issue that makes feminism matter. . . .I'm tired of the conventions that keep discussions of epistemology, or James Joyce, segregated from meditations on what is happening outside my window or inside my heart. The public-private dichotomy, which is to say the public-private hierarchy is a founding condition of female oppression. I say to hell with it. The reason I feel embarassed at my own attempts to speak personally in a professional context is that I have been conditioned to feel that way. That's all there is to it. . . .

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Appendix A

Passage A:

> Females, in my opinion, were looked down on throughout the entire book [LeGuin, The Dispossessed]. As society progresses, it seems that people would become a little more openminded. Instead, these men looked down on everyone that was a woman.

Passage B:

> The females, on the other hand, were considered weak and unintelligent as a gender. They were degraded in most aspects of life. They were thought of as meek people with no common sense at all. If a woman was strong, physically or mentally, she was not given the respect that she deserved. The men at this time wanted there [sic] women meek and un-dominating because I think that whis was romantic to them.

Part A: MAJOR VIEWPOINTS OF CURRENT FEMINIST CRITICISM

BIOLOGY

Former male arguments using women's biology, their reproductive function, to keep her in her place are turned around to celebrate the superiority of the female body. A woman's body is the source of all positive female values.

Mary Ellmann, Thinking About Women (1968): Suggest we thing of the ovum as individualistic, daring, independent and the sperm as conforming and sheeplike; attacks "phallic" criticism

EXPERIENCE

Largely because of their experience of female biological functions, women's thinking and feeling promote special life enhancing perceptions in life and art. Studies works of women. Experience based feminism

Patricia Spacks, The Female Imagination (1975): Studies female authors how they felt, perceived themselves, imagined reality.

Ellen Moers, Literary Women (1977): There are specific female genres (gothic) myths (birth) and symbols, (Anne Frank's bird); describes women writers' warmth and regard for each other.

Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own, (1977): Examines the literary representation of sexual difference in women's writing (gynocritics).

From Bronte to today sees three major phases, (1) a feminine phase, (2) a feminist phase and (3) a female phase.

Nina Averbach, Communities of Women (1978) Charted commonalities among women of various periods coming from a shared female experience.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic, (1979): Key women writers since Jane Austen have achieved a distinctive female voice by conforming to patriarchal literary standards at the same time they subvert them. In images of enclosure, doubles, disease, and landscape, women writers redefine themselves, art, and society.

DISCOURSE

Concerned with the power of language, feminists examine a range of issues; who controls language. Does a women's language exist: Is it inferior to a men's language? Can and should women create a female discourse? What is true depends on who controls discourse. Text based feminism.

Annette Kolodny, The Lay of the Land (1975): Women's sytle includes reflexive constructions and recurring themes - clothing, self-fashioning.

Robin Lakoff, Language and Women's Place (1975): Women's language is inferior with patterns of "weakness" and "uncertainty," focuses on trivial; stresses personal emotional responses.

Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976): Calls for women to put their bodies into their writing; rejects any universal feminist theory; imagines a possible female language; gender difference is the fundamental distinction of human culture.

Julia Kristeva, Desire in Language (1980): Female discourse disrupts a unitary meaning and logocentric (phallocentric) discourse sees polarity between "closed" rational systems and "open" disruptive, irrational systems feminine language is "semiotic" not "symbolic".

Dale Spender, Manmade Language (1980): Women have been repressed by a male-dominated language.

Lucy Irigary, The Sex Which Is Not One (1985): As in feminine sexuality, women's language is more diffusive than its masculine counterpart. Language as a form of contact, not representation.

THE UNCONSCIOUS

Female sexuality cannot be defined because it is revolutionary, subversive and "open." It encourages free play of meaning lack of "closure," and it undermines the authority of "male" discourse.

Nancy Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and The Sociology of Gender (1978): Argues that the mother-daughter relation lies beyond oedipal drama of Father-sons; relation between mother-daughter is harmonious.

Mary Jacobus, "Is There a Woman in This Text" (1982): Theories of male creativity depend on removing or belittling women; Freud's Oedipus complex denies girls' experience so as to remodel them as mirror images of boys.

Juliet Mitchell, Psychoanalysis and Feminism, (1982): Fears feminist scholars will be excluded from the main stream.

SOCIO-POLITICAL-ECONOMIC

Sometimes using Marxist theories, feminists relate social and economic conditions to the balance of power between the sexes.

Virgina Woolf, A Room of One's Own (1929): The conditions under which men/women work are different and therefore create difference in the form and content of what they write; here fictive Judith Shakespeare embodies the problems.

Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex (1949): Women are an oppressed group like other repressed groups. Except they are not a minority.

Kate Millet, Sexual Politics (1970): Patriarchal structure of society oppresses women. Women are coerced and subjected to male dominance. Sex "roles" are repressive.

Germaine Greer, The Female Eunich (1971): Women are powerless in a patriarchal system.

Judith Fetterly, The Resisting Reader (1978): Examined portrayals of women characters; exposed the patriarchal idiology of such works.

Michele Barret, Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis (1980): The dominance of the patriarchy is related to capital. She examines issues like the economic organization of households, division of labor, systems of education, the cultural process in which men and women are differently represented. Also, the ideology of gender affects the way men and women are read and how canons are established. Also, male actions should not be condemned for all the sexism in their works; they are developing a fictional context.

Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt, eds. Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class and Race in Literature and Culture (1985): Women are not universally powerless and universally good. Socio-economic realiites play as important part in constructing gender roles.

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Part B: STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE TEXTS

BIOLOGY	EXPERIENCE	DISCOURSE	THE UNCONSCIOUS	SOCIO-POLITICAL-ECONOMIC
	V. "The narrator felt that the role of women in the war was much tougher than that of men because the only thing that the women dealth with was wounded or dead soldiers."	P. "Nothing really jumps out at me - maybe that in Betrayal Emma was portrayed as the villiam, even though Jerry & Robert were both cheating, also. It was written by a man, so that's to be expected. If it was written by a woman, Jerry & Robert would be the bad guys,: Emma would be the victim." R. Dorothy Wordsworth "I found her writing beautiful and enjoyable to read...She didn't try to stuff numerous symbols and deep meaningful passages into here writing. That's because she wasn't trying to impress anyone. In this case the female writer surpassed her male counterparts." R. "A lot of the poems... mention a woman figure, whether it be a friend, family member, or true love. So, I don't think that women were just forgotten about or not bothered with in writing, especially poetry."		P. Betrayal - Marginalizing women "In the play Betrayal, one paragraph caught my attention .. when Robert was telling Emma why she couldn't come with he & Jerry to play squash. All she wanted to do was come along and watch them buy them lunch. Robert's attitude towards her was demeaning. When he talked about why men don't want women around when they're together made no sense. He made Emma feel stupid for even sugessting that she come along. Men have done that for years, excluding women from their activitiss." P. "Harold Pinter doesn't like women very much I think. He makes women out to be the roots of all of the trouble in his stories. this could be like a feminine issue. When women used to be just ornamental fixtures in the background, and didn't have any rights, everything would be fine.." P. (Marginalizing women) "The discussion of the first play- old times showed what could be considered a feminist issue. Lesbianism." P. - Pinter displays feminism in the play "Old Times." Kate is portrayed as a hopeless individual who needs someone to attend to here because she is incapable of doing so herself. P. "The woman always is lightly below the man." **Women as sex objects** "in HocusPocus...they are just used for sex & that's all." P. Pinter seems to see the female as a sex symbol in some of his plays. The story revolves around who they are sleeping with, or cheeting on." R. "From the reading that we've done in this class, I don't really recall a lot of things about women or women's issues, but I will tell you what I remember. It seems that men went around getting women pregnant and men left them. And there was nothing they coud do about it. It seems that women were totally inferior, but no different than the women of today. A woman's opinion meant nothing. Women were the objects of love or sex or both. Maybe except in the case of Dorothy Wordsworth." R. **Preponderance of male writers** "Society did not welcome women in writing - That was the men's area. I tend to agree with the latter. Women were just not so popularly accepted in writing as men were, and that's why there are more men writers in our book than women."

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Part B: STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE TEXTS

BIOLOGY	EXPERIENCE	DISCOURSE	THE UNCONSCIOUS	SOCIO-POLITICAL-ECONOMIC
L. "The women were not educated in certain areas because their mind didn't have the capacity to understand that knowledge." L. "They were known to men, as the person used for self-fulfillment for the male (sex)." L. "Women are as capable as men and even though women may not have great physical strength they do possess great endurance." L. "I heard Roseanne Barr speaking on the subject [sex roles] - she said 'I don't know why my husband thinks I can find his misplaced items. You would swear he things my uterus is a tracking device.' As a topic among people they seem to think that the only difference between a male and a female is a uterus." L. "The only reason for the existence of the separate sexes is for reproduction...so the man-women pairing seems to exist only as a biological function." L. There are bound to be differences in the sexes - after all there are 2 separate genders."	L. "I was surprised that the author, who was a woman, would make a point to add this to her book." L. "I would think that she would want to discourage attitudes like this and have women actively involved with life." L. "they [authors] are struck back in time instead of reflecting on the future. Ursula Leguin is stuck in the past." L. "I'm interested in the fact that throughout the book woman are considered to be useless and without any worth. Even at the time that LeGuinn wrote this I would think that women would have played a higher role in society." L. "I do believe that the women in Urras are not treated fairly when it comes to child bearing and closeness with a family."			L. "They [women] were the one to stay home and care for the children." L. "A woman is in charge of the lift-off of the mindful [rocket] and the people (men & women included) do not question her ability to complete the task." L. "On Urras women are treated as tiny, little, delicate creatures whose only job is to seem beautiful and cater tho their husband's needs." L. "In that society, I don't see how the role of women is much different that the way that women are today. For example, Takver basically raises the baby Sadik." L. "In Anarres the ultimate equal rights movement occurred. Men and women did equal work for equal benefits." L. "They [women] hold no authority in government and are mostly not respected for their minds." L. "Shevek is disarming male/female roles with Vea. H claims that her society is totally controlled by the men. Men do anything they want to do. Vea argues with him that women do exactly what they want to do... the woman's job is considered by her to be -'why, run the men, of course.' The women use manipulation to get exactly what they want. Manipulation is not always a bad word."
R. "The men [poets] were the stronger mentally and physically and were considered this way over all the females." R. "We are Seven." - "No means of contraception did exist and the lack of a social-net made it necessary for parents to have many children in order to be provided for in their old age. Therefore, women were reduced to 'birth machines' - a condition that, again fostered children's mortality."	R. "The men at this time wanted their women meek and undominating because I think that this was romantic to them." R. "A woman's issue that I found illustrated indirectly in Wordsworth's poem 'We are Seven is Children's Mortality.' Although both parents suffer from the death of a child, I believe that teir suffering is different. Therefore a mother's guilt becomes a woman's issue. An issue that concerned almost all laboring-class women, since at least once in their lifetime's they ahd to witness the death of a child before it grew out of its toddler years."	R. Blake's "London" depicts women in general, quite poorly. He speaks of any "Infant's tear" - being a venereal disease - from a harlot ... "converting the marriage coach into a funeral hearse." Like we die inside if we get married.		R. "The concept of women during the romantic period is that women are innocent and need to be protected." R. "Afton Water" "Mary is made but to be a weak sapling who can't even handle the noise of a rushing stream." R. "Women's problems did exist...[and] found them literary expression...indirectly in the writing of Blake, Wordsworth, and Colerdge." R. Norton Anthology/Women authors "Women were not permitted the freedom of expression on educational opportunities available to men."

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A female British Literature II student studying Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats writes:

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